



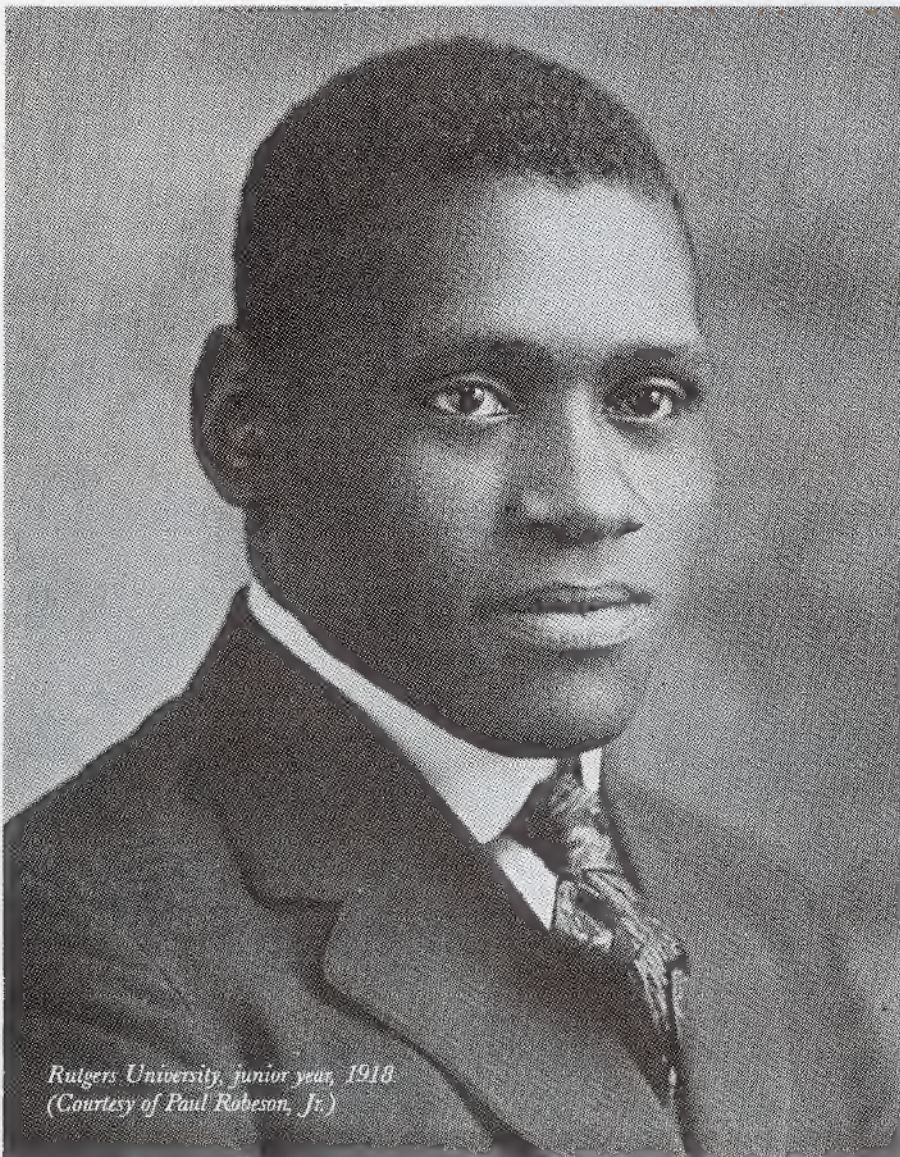
# PAUL ROBESON:

## *An American Hero*

### A Study Guide for Teachers

*"I want my life to be a memorial  
to my fathers training. . ."*

Paul Robeson, 1919



*Rutgers University, junior year, 1918  
(Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.)*

**P**aul Robeson lived for 78 years. His father William, who was born a slave, escaped from slavery and came North on the Underground Railroad. William Robeson showed exceptional courage and determination, as did all of those who escaped from slavery. His son Paul inherited those remarkable qualities, and his life was a "memorial" to his father's character.

Many important events took place during Paul Robeson's life. In many ways, understanding his life can give us a deeper understanding of African-American history. The following is a synopsis of the major events that happened during his lifetime.

Paul was born into a world of tumult. In 1898, the year of his birth, the Spanish American War was fought. Jim Crow, the practice of segregation and discrimination against African-Americans, was practiced in the South. Lynchings were common in the years of Paul's early childhood.

Paul was a boy during the "Great Migration," the years from 1910-1918 when African-American people came North from the South looking for opportunities and freedom. He was 14 years-old when the African National Congress, the South African organization devoted to ending apartheid, was organized. That same year, 1912, was also the year the first "Tarzan" cartoon appeared.

By 1919, African-American soldiers were returning from Europe after the first world war. They had risked their lives protecting the freedom of



Europeans, and believed they were entitled to the same freedom at home. Paul was 21 in 1919. Marcus Garvey's *Black Star Line*, the steamships that were to return black Americans to Africa, were docked on the Hudson River in New York City that year. Paul was a student at Columbia during that time and probably visited the ships that were docked there. In 1926, James Weldon Johnson published his collection of American Negro Spirituals. Paul read this book and was deeply affected by the strength of African-American spirituality. This pride in African-American cultural heritage became an important part of his identity as an artist and political activist.

Paul was active in many political causes during these years. In 1931, he

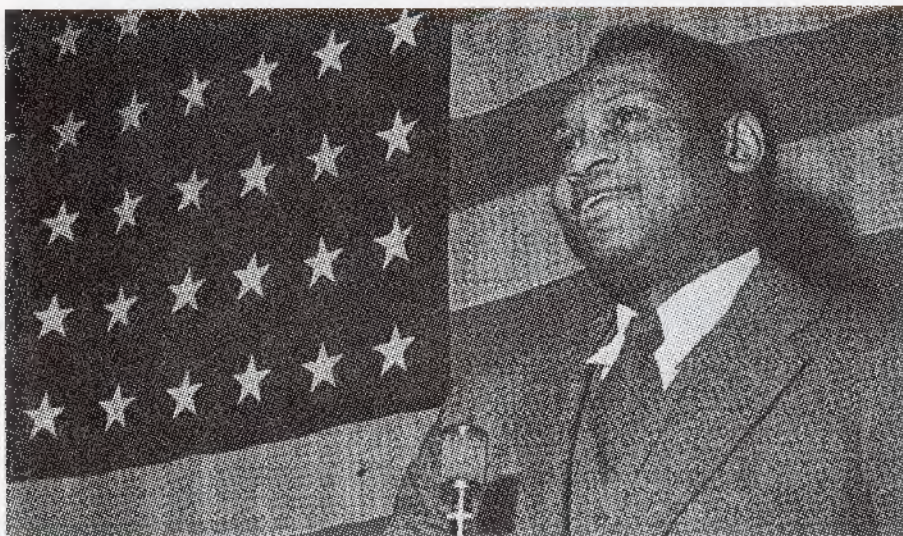
sang at benefits for the Scottsboro boys. In 1941, he helped establish the Council on African Affairs which he later co-chaired with W.E.B. Dubois.

Paul's passport was revoked in 1950. The years in which Paul Robeson was silenced by the U.S. government, were important ones for African-Americans. The Brown vs. Board of Education court decision was handed down in 1954. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the Montgomery bus boycott from December 1955 thru December 1956. Ghana, the first African nation to free itself from European rule, gained its independence in 1957. The liberation of Africa and the birth of the Civil Rights movement were important symbols of freedom to all Black people. But Paul was effectively silenced

during that period.

In 1958, Paul regained his passport. He left for Europe and remained there for five years. He returned to the United States during one of the most violent years of the Civil Rights movement. In 1963, Medgar Evers of the Mississippi NAACP was assassinated in front of his home. In Birmingham, the police turned dogs and water hoses on school children who were demonstrating for their rights. That same year, four little black girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham.

After Essie, Paul's wife, died in 1965, he went into seclusion. He was elected to the Theater Hall of Fame in 1972 and honored by people as a fighter for freedom. Paul Robeson died in 1976.



*New York City, 1939.  
(Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.)*

### *Before the Presentations*

Explain to your students that Paul Robeson was a singer, actor, scholar, lawyer and athlete. Tell them that he lived in New Jersey and attended Rutgers University, a state university. Explain that today, many people consider him a hero because he fought for justice for all Americans.

### *After the Presentations*

Make a world map available to your class. Ask the students to name the countries that Paul Robeson visited. Mark each country as it is named.



### *Ask your students the following questions:*

Why do some people call Paul Robeson a "citizen of the world?" (Possible answers: Because he was cared about by people in many countries. Because he learned the languages of many people.)

What are some of the things that you admire about Paul Robeson? (Possible answers: His courage. His talent. His dignity. His concern about other people.)

If he were alive today, what are some of the things he would be fighting for or against? (Possible answers: He would be fighting for the rights of

homeless people. He would be fighting against apartheid. He would be fighting for justice for all Americans.)



*Show Boat, Hollywood, 1935.  
(Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.)*



**Autobiography** — The story of a person's life that is written by himself or herself.

**Cold War** — A term used to describe the chilly relationship and rivalry that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II.

**Communism** — A system of government in which all property and goods are owned by the government and shared equally by all the people. The government of the Soviet Union is based on this system.

**Communist** — A person who believes in the system of communism.

**Conservative** — A person who wants things to be as they once were and is against new ideas or change.



**Democracy** — A government that is run by the people who live under it. In a democracy, people may run the government directly or elect representatives to govern. The United States is a democracy.

**Integration** — The act of making something open to people of all races.

**Lynching** — The act of hanging someone by mob action before he or she has been found guilty by law.

**Oppression** — The state of being ruled by cruel and unjust means.

**Poverty** — The lack of money; being poor.

**Prejudice** — An opinion that is formed about a person or people without really knowing them. An opinion that is not based upon truth.

**Segregation** — Separation of people by race.

**Spirituals** — A religious folk song that was sung by enslaved African-Americans.

## PAUL ROBESON EDUCATION PROJECT

### *Follow-Up Activities*

#### FOLK HISTORY

Ask each student to interview an older relative or friend of the family. Have them ask such questions as "What do you remember about Paul Robeson? Was he an American hero? Why or why not? Have each child record the responses to their ques-

tions; then have a class discussion about people's perceptions of Paul Robeson.

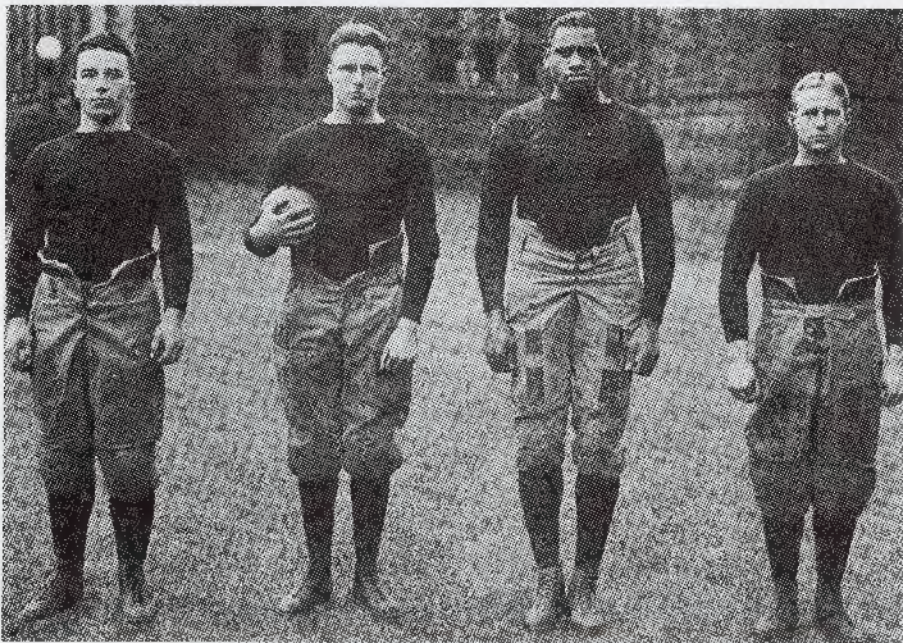
#### A DAY IN THE LIFE

Have your students imagine that they are Paul Robeson for a day. Then ask each student to choose a particular

period in Paul Robeson's life and have them write a first person narrative that expresses their feelings about that time.

#### TIMELINE

Using the background information as a guideline for your students, have them design a timeline that illustrates Paul Robeson's life and the significant events in African-American history from 1898 to 1976.



*Rutgers University football team, star players, 1918. (Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.)*

